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AUTHOR Woods, Paula A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Thirteen large state universities offering comprehensive services to learning-disabled students responded to a questionnaire concerning general program characteristics, existing support services, accommodations to aid students in using those services, standardized assessment and diagnosis, and types of academic assistance. Results showed that most institutions offered such support services as priority registration, special test/quiz administration, reader services, tutor services, and extra time to complete assignments. Academic, social, and career counseling was offered by all schools. For learning-disabled students who did not meet admissions criteria, half of the institutions used standardized diagnostic information describing the learning disability for additional consideration of admissibility, while others used pre-admission interviews, grade point averages, writing samples, letters of recommendation, and in-house testing to determine admissibility. The two most-often reported standardized instruments used to assess learning disability were the WAIS-R and the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery. Most institutions did not use assessment information for placement in classes, but did use it to design support services and accommodations for the students. Implications for student personnel services, faculty development, and future research are outlined. (Author/JDD)

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LEARNING DISABILITY PROGRAMS IN LARGE UNIVERSITIES

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SUMMARY

Increased numbers of learning disabled (LD) students in higher education have led to a significant growth in LD services at the post-secondary level during the past decade. However, little research has been conducted to examine the nature of learning disabilities programs nationwide in terms of types of support services offered, assessment, diagnosis, and whether LD college student needs are being met.

In order to obtain more detailed information on the nature of available LD services, a descriptive study examining the implementation and organization of comprehensive LD programs in post-secondary institutions nationwide was conducted. Thirteen large, state universities who offered comprehensive LD services responded to a mail survey questionnaire soliciting detailed information about their LD programs. Results identified general program characteristics, existing support services, accomodations implemented to aid students in using those services, standardized assessment and diagnosis, and types of academic assistance found among the schools. Implications for future program design and service provision are also discussed.

The existence of learning disability (LD) services in higher education is a relatively recent ocurrence. Education for learning disabled individuals has traditionally been focused on those at the elementary school level. Vogel(1982) noted that during the 1970's, educational services for those with learning disabilities were expanded to the secondary school level. It is only since the 1980's that LD services have evidenced significant growth at the post-secondary level. Vogel(1982) stated that the increase in LD services among colleges, universities, graduate and professional schools was in response to "two powerful sources of pressure": (a) the community of concerned LD adolescents, their parents, LD adults, and professionals, and (b) the passage of regulations to enforce Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Nonetheless, the number of post-secondary institutions offering appropriate educational and support services to learning disabled college students remains scarce (Vogel,1982).

In a review of the literature on post-secondary education for LD college students, Putnam(1984) suggested that four major reasons for the shortage of programs were: (a) general costs and program expenses; (b) LD adolescents' perception of college education as nonessential; (c) traditional concern for academic excellence in higher education and (d) the lack of awareness and knowledge among college program personnel about the LD students' special needs. In addition, the lack of research findings on the post-secondary LD student and services has contributed to

limited availability of LD college programs (Cordoni, 1982). Thus, definitive data are lacking on LD students' needs and the existing college programs that service them.

Research in the field of learning disabilities also has a relatively brief history. The term "learning disability" only came into use in the 1960's. Furthermore, results of current research have been contradictory due to inconsistencies over the definition and diagnosis of learning disabilities. For instance, Blackburn and Iovacchini (1982) have noted that several states have differential standards for diagnosing learning disabilities. Some states utilize measures of perceptions or processing as the basis for LD diagnosis. In contrast, other states define learning disability as measured discrepancy between expected and current academic performance.

Difficulty in the assessment of learning disability has contributed to inconsistent diagnoses. Lack of empirical data on identification of appropriate diagnostic measures for learning disability assessment in adults has also contributed to ambiguity in the field (Putnam, 1984; Vogel, 1982). Adelman and Taylor (1981) have further commented that few of the currently available assessment procedures meet the minimal standards set forth by the American Psychological Association and the American Educational Research Association. There is consequently very little consistent research available on LD diagnosis to guide professionals in the field (Vogel, 1982). Thus, there is still no universally accepted definition of learning disabilities among

professionals (Vogel, 1982).

Literature on post-secondary LD programs in particular is scarce. However, of the existing studies, several aspects of learning disabilities have been explored. Theoretical articles describing the process of implementation and development of LD college programs have been presented (Vogel,1982). Descriptive research on LD programs in specific types of higher educational settings within designated geographical areas has also been reported, i. e., LD programs in California community colleges (Ostertag, Baker, Howard, & Best, 1982). Research on characteristics of LD college students has been conducted as well (Cohen, 1984; Haig & Patterson, 1980). In addition, general information in the form of directories and guides to LD services has been reported (Cordoni, 1982; Moss & Fielding, 1981). Also, a compendium of readings describing model service delivery programs in post-secondary education is available [Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Post-secondary Education, (AHSSPPE), 1986]. Although the compendium provides an orientation and important guidelines for establishing LD support services, little survey research on large LD programs nationwide is reported.

The University of Maryland at College Park (UMCP) started a Disabled Student Services National Data Bank in 1982, with support from AHSSPPE, for purposes of selective followup on schools offering support services for the disabled. It was felt that the existence of a data base for disabled student services

in higher education would be helpful in identifying types of services being offered. Institutions participating in the Data Bank do so on a voluntary basis, and membership has ranged from n = 44 to n = 100 since its' inception during the academic year 1982-1983. Obtaining general facts about existing LD services has given researchers better tools with which to probe and evaluate LD services in greater detail. More detailed information on types of LD support services offered, assessment, and diagnosis should be examined, particularly in schools with comprehensive LD programs and resources.

Further, given that identified learning disabled students are a relatively new phenomenon in post-secondary education, their college participation is requiring reevaluation of LD programs and services (Ostertag et al, 1982). It therefore becomes important to specifically examine the implementation and organization of comprehensive LD programs in post-secondary institutions in order to better assess and meet the unique needs of LD college students.

Method

Thirteen of 18 large, state universities who offered comprehensive services for learning disabled college students completed a mail survey questionnaire. Eighteen state universities were chosen to be sampled based on the fact that they offered comprehensive services and programs for learning disabled students, and have LD programs serving 20 or more

students. All state universities surveyed were identified through participation in the Disabled Student Service National Data Bank.

The questionnaire included items on adjustments implemented to assist LD students, means by which students were academically assisted in LD programs, use of informal assessment and clinical interviews, and physical location of the LD services unit. The questionnaire was based in part on one developed by Ostertag et al (1982).

Results

Program characteristics

Eighty-four percent of the thirteen schools indicated that LD services officially started between the years of 1977 and 1984. Sixty-nine percent of the LD programs were physically located in a Disabled Student Service unit and 69% did not have a separate budget for LD services. Only 47% of respondents employed full-time LD specialists on staff, with the remainder employing part-time LD specialists to service students. Sixty-two percent of the respondents did not know the number of learning disabled graduates during the previous school year.

Support services

Results indicated several different types of support services available for LD students. Table 1 shows the specific support services available through LD programs. All respondents (100 %) indicated availability of consultation to faculty on

classroom accomodation, test/quiz administration service, and tutoring service to LD students. Ninety-two percent of the schools offered reader service as part of their programs and 77% offered priority registration for LD students. Thirty-nine percent of respondents offered other services such as support groups, learning strategies counseling, and workshops for competency exams.

Accomodations

Accomodations implemented to aid students in utilizing LD services are reported in Table 2. All respondents (100 %) arranged for students to have additional time on exams as needed. Also, 85% of the participant schools arranged for testing in an alternate format. Extra time on assignments was arranged by 69% of respondents, and time to complete individual coursework was extended by 62% of the institutions.

Assessment and Diagnosis

Admissions criteria and assessment tools utilized during the admissions process varied among respondents. Fifty-five percent made a separate consideration of admissibility when LD students did not meet the institution's regular admissions criteria. Fifty-four percent used standardized diagnostic information describing their learning disability while 47% used a pre-admission interview. Other respondents used grade point average, the WAIS-R, and in-house testing to determine admissability.

The two most often reported standardized instruments used to

assess learning disability were the WAIS-R (54%) and the Woodcock - Johnson Psychoeducational Battery (46%). Other measures reported were the Modern Language Aptitude (23%), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (15%) and the Bender Visual-Motor Gestalt Test (15%).

Documentation on learning disability was required by 92% of reporting institutions. Sixty-seven percent of respondents did not use assessment information for placement in classes, while 85% used assessment and diagnostic information to design support services and accomodations for LD students.

Type of Academic Assistance

Means by which students were academically assisted in LD programs are shown in Table 3. Tutorial support was primarily delivered on a one-to-one basis by either an LD specialist(66%) or peer tutor(75%). Academic, personal, and career counseling internal to the LD program primarily took place on a one-to-one basis. Additionally, such counseling external to the LD program was offered by all reporting institutions and took place in a one-to-one or in-group setting.

Discussion

Overall, the results show a general picture of LD program characteristics in large universities nationwide.

In general, LD services were consistently offered in a number of areas. Most institutions offered support services such as priority registration, test/quiz administration, reader

service, and tutoring service as part of their LD programs. Provisions for additional time on exams or testing in an alternate format were also prevalent among the respondents. Academic, social, and career counseling internal to LD programs was offered by all schools, indicating a beginning awareness of LD college student needs.

Inconsistencies among respondents were primarily found in identification, assessment and diagnosis of learning disabilities. These inconsistencies supported results obtained by (Ostertag et al, 1982). When an LD student did not meet admissions criteria, only half of all reporting institutions used standardized information on diagnosis describing the student's learning disability for additional consideration of admissibility. The remainder used several different types of information such as writing samples, pre-admission interviews, and letters of recommendation.

Use of standardized assessment tools to evaluate learning disability in the admissions process was equally inconsistent. Over 10 different assessment tools were used either independently or in some combination by the 13 schools. Interestingly, only 33% of the respondents used diagnostic information for placement in classes. Additionally, diagnosis was not consistently conducted in-house, as several schools expected LD students to bring confirmation of learning disabilities with them.

The necessity for more standardized identification and

assessment of learning disabilities among post-secondary institutions is called for. The large number of assessment tools utilized among respondents also indicates a need for standardized identification of reliable, valid instruments for purposes of appraising learning disabilities. More standardized definition and diagnosis of learning disabilities is therefore recommended in order to better meet LD student needs. Given that most schools did not know how many LD students were graduated the previous academic year, the need for more formal and consistent data-gathering, particularly among administrators, on these students is also suggested.

More empirical data on appropriate diagnostic instruments used to assess learning disabilities should be gathered in future studies. In order to implement more effective LD programs, the initial task of diagnosing and correctly identifying the population to be served is crucial. Additionally, the effect of budgetary and staff restrictions need to be determined in order to better provide services which meet the LD students' special needs.

Cohen (1984) also emphasizes the need for student personnel administrators and deans to be able to recognize learning disabilities in the college student, as they are "often required to understand, counsel, and direct students who report academic dysfunction" (p. 22). In addition, Cohen notes that student personnel professionals are often the first step in the evaluation process for students experiencing academic problems.

Results of this study therefore hold important implications for this group in particular.

Initially, the results imply that clear guidelines in the diagnosis and identification of learning disabilities must be established, as it is extremely important to delineate LD from other types of disorders. Once LD is clearly identified, the student personnel administrator must then construct an effective plan for the student so that his/her academic needs may be better met. Several considerations need to be taken into account at this point. For example, what instructional modes are best for an LD student? Students with dyslexia may need to more often work with an audio-visual mode of instruction than do non-dyslexic students in order to be successful in an academic setting. The fact that different types of courses require different types of study skills should also be acknowledged. A history course will clearly require more reading and verbal skills than a math applications course. In relation to study skills, assessment of LD students' particular learning strengths and weaknesses is also important. The need for modification of course pace may also become another factor to be considered.

The issue of what type of faculty should either be trained or are best prepared to teach LD students is also important. Perhaps, further professional training and staff development in working with LD students is needed for current staff. Employing more LD specialists as direct service providers or consultants, if feasible, may also be an alternative. In addition, more

individual program planning for LD students may be needed at the administrative level.

There are three important guidelines student personnel professionals should consider when working with LD college students:

(a) Ensure that diagnosis and identification of LD is clear beyond doubt in order to avoid misdiagnosis. Use of standardized assessment tools is recommended here.

(b) Based on type of disability, both in terms of its' physical and psychological impact upon the student, an effective academic plan which will maximize the individual's chances for success in the school environment should be constructed.

(c) Utilize the expertise of other professionals who work closely with LD individuals in terms of their special academic and developmental needs.

On the whole, student personnel administrators are becoming required to recognize the academic, psychological, and developmental needs of LD students. Once these needs are clearly identified and recognized, specific academic programs may then be tailored to better meet them. In order to incorporate programs which address LD students' academic needs in post-secondary institutions, educators must begin to evaluate the often far-reaching impact of learning disabilities in the academic setting.

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TABLE 1

Support Services Available to LD Students

Percentage of Schools Offering Services

Service	% of Schools Offering
Tutoring	100
Test Administration Service	100
Consultation to Faculty on Classroom Accomodation	100
Reader Service	92
Priority Registration	77
Note-Taking Service	62
Orientation for LD Students	39
Other: Support group, counseling, workshops	39

TABLE 2

Accomodations Implemented to Aid Students in Utilizng LD Services

Accomodations	% of Schools Offering
Arrange for students to have extra time for exams	100
Arrange for testing in alternate format	85
Arrange for students to have extra time on assignments	69
Arrange course substitutions	69
Extend time to complete individual course requirements	62
Waive or extend time limits to complete degree requirements	54
Course materials presented in alternate form	23
Provision of remedial coursework	15

TABLE 3

Means by Which Students are Academically Assisted in LD Programs

	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
TUTORIAL SUPPORT:	One-to-one		In-group		Course Offering	
LD Specialist	8	62	3	23	0	--
Peer Tutor	10	77	5	39	2	15
Aide	2	15	1	8	1	8
Other Faculty	3	23	4	31	2	15
COUNSELING INTERNAL TO LD PROGRAM:	One-to-one		In-group		Course Offering	
Academic	11	85	5	39	0	--
Personal	11	85	4	31	1	8
Career	11	85	5	39	0	--
COUNSELING EXTERNAL TO LD PROGRAM:						
Academic	13	100	9	69	4	31
Personal	13	100	10	77	3	23
Career	13	100	11	85	6	46